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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes toward and knowledge about suicide of gifted and unselected high school students. A questionnaire was developed which included items about societal factors related to suicide, warning signs of suicide, general knowledge of and attitudes about suicide, personal knowledge about suicide, and the intervention strategy or action an adolescent might take if a friend confided a suicidal intent. In general, gifted students did not appear to have more knowledge about suicide and had similar attitudes to other students. Gifted students, however, were more likely to indicate that self would be the primary intervention person, whereas the unselected students ranked themselves as the fifth choice in providing intervention. The responses of the 12 students who had actually attempted suicide were not significantly different from those of their respective groups. Other findings included: more than 50% of both groups knew someone who had attempted suicide; more than 20% had seriously considered suicide themselves; major reasons suggested for attempted suicide were problems at home and drugs and alcohol; over 70% believed that depression, withdrawal, and giving away possessions were signs of pre-suicidal behavior; about 90% believed loneliness increases suicide risk; and no students indicated they would take no action if a friend confided suicidal intentions. (Includes eight references). (DB)

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Title: Gifted Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Suicide

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Purpose of Research: Gifted and unselected high school students were surveyed concerning their attitudes toward and knowledge about suicide, with comparison made of the two groups.

Introduction: Beliefs and attitudes of adolescents, even gifted adolescents, are frequently based upon a kind of teen folk lore, with more credence placed upon peer statements than on adult advice. This is also true for gifted adolescents, despite research which found that high achievers' opinions and beliefs about suicide, when asked direct questions, were similar to those of professionals in the field (Lindegard, 1986). Some evidence, however, suggests a link between high ability and suicide (Delisle, 1986, Hayes & Sloat, 1989, 1990; Lajoie & Shore, 1981). Are the folk-lore beliefs and attitudes which influence adolescents, sometimes propelling them toward self-destructive behavior, perceived differently by gifted adolescents?

Method: A questionnaire was developed which, in addition to asking basic demographic questions, contained 53 respondable items dealing with societal factors related to suicide, warning signs of suicide, general knowledge of and attitudes about suicide, personal knowledge about suicide, and the intervention strategy or action an adolescent might take in the event a friend confided an intent to commit suicide. The questionnaires were administered to the gifted students in honors English classes, and to unselected students during a social science fair at a different Dallas County high school. The responses were examined separately and compared.

Results: General similarity between the two groups was indicated. The gifted students did not appear to have more knowledge about suicide than did their age-mates. With the exception of a few items, their attitudes were also quite similar, and they did not view suicide differently. A difference was found, however, in the attitudes of the two groups in respect to intervention choices. The gifted students more often indicated that they would be the primary intervention person, followed by their own parents, and then the friend's parents. The unselected students identified a cluster of primary intervention persons, including (in rank order) a crisis center or hotline, the friend's parents, other individuals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, or members of the clergy, and then their own parents, with the choice of providing intervention themselves ranking 5th.

The responses of the twelve students who indicated thay they had actually attempted suicide themselves were not significantly different from those of their respective groups. There were also few differences between male and female responses.

About 72% of the gifted students wrote additional comments on the response forms, while only 34% of the unselected students did so. The remainder of the results, which were quite similar, included:

1. More than 50% of both groups knew someone who had attempted suicide, and more than 20% had seriously considered suicide themselves.
2. The four major reasons both groups believed that adolescents attempt suicide are:
   a. problems at home
   b. drugs and alcohol

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c. loss of a boy- or girlfriend
d. divorce of parents

3. Over 70% believed that depression, withdrawal, and giving away prized possessions were signs of pre-suicidal behavior.
4. About 90% believed that loneliness increases suicide risk.
5. Not one student indicated that he or she would take no action if a friend confided that he or she intended to commit suicide.

Practical Implications: The results of the study were consistent with Lindegard's (1986) national study of high achievers, particularly in the area of personal knowledge. Caution should be exercised, however, in generalizing the results of the study due to differences between the school surveyed, and the possibility that more gifted students than the norm may have been included in the group of unselected students, due to the nature of the event at which they were surveyed. Nevertheless, the findings that many able and nonselected teens held some erroneous beliefs or incomplete information about suicide and suicide risk, and the fact that many would attempt to provide intervention themselves rather that break the teen code of secrecy, support the need for ongoing information, prevention, and intervention programs.

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